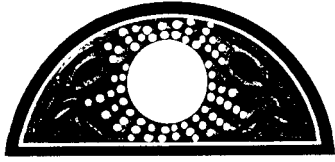


Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Children: Present and Future Services & Policy

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This paper will address the overall approach of the present government to the provision of Aboriginal children's services in the context of the social indicators about Aboriginal children within Aboriginal society and non-Aboriginal society. It will then outline the proper and appropriate frameworks for the development of services for Aboriginal children.

SNAICC (Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care) has for many years been calling for the implementation of national legislation to safeguard and protect the rights of Aboriginal children. More recently, we have also developed the view that the field of Aboriginal children's services is fragmented and unplanned and therefore requires the development of a national plan and strategy for children to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) children and to ensure that the provision of services is appropriate.

MACS (Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services)

The present array of services for ATSI children has developed along the designs of non-Aboriginal services and are funded according to guidelines that are intended to address the needs of children generally. At the Commonwealth level, the development of the guidelines for the funding of MACS and AICCAs (Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies) has been a haphazard process with guidelines that reflect the government's desire to bring Aboriginal child services into the mainstream guidelines of funding. Thus in the guidelines for the funding of MACS in the 80s, we saw for the first time the inclusion of the 'community income target' to try and move MACS into line with other government funded child care which had begun to move towards principles of child care for working parents, and self-sufficiency.

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These changes generally reflected the narrowing of the focus for child care provision. In the Aboriginal children's area, they signalled the government's change of direction and assessment of Aboriginal children's needs.

AICCAs (Aboriginal & Islander Child Care Agencies)

For the AICCAs the situation is different. Today we are fighting a major battle with the Federal government over its desire to shed the Children's Services Program of the responsibility for this type of services. Their erroneous perception is that AICCAs are fostering and adoption programs, and therefore quite clearly a state and territory responsibility. The Commonwealth was compelled to assume responsibility for AICCA services in the late seventies because of the inability of states and territory governments to deal with the large numbers of Aboriginal children entering the child welfare systems. This was not just a matter of an inability to deal with the sheer volume of Aboriginal children coming into care, but just as importantly, was the incompetence of authorities and the racism of these departments in their dealings with Aboriginal children and their families. The consequences of the removal and assimilationist policies were still very much in evidence in the disproportionate numbers of children being removed at that time. The Fraser Government Minister, Senator Margaret Guilfoyle, recognised this and took the step of approving funding initially for the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency in 1977.

There had been a lot of agitating and lobbying going on through the seventies which ultimately convinced the Government to take action. People like Mollie Dyer and others had worked tirelessly to achieve changes, and without taking anything away from the Government of that time, it should be stressed that it was not an easy matter to convince them to fund AICCAs. Certainly the First Australian Adoption Conference in 1976, passed a resolution which gave the demands of Aboriginal people a great boost. The revelation at that time by the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, that 90% of its adult clientele had, as children, been removed from their families and put into institutions or other forms of care (usually non-Aboriginal care) had highlighted the need for Aboriginal community intervention in the child and family services area.

The first AICCAs, and indeed all since then funded by the Commonwealth, have been funded in the absence of guidelines. Any guidelines that have been used have been those applied to general child care services in the Child Services Program.

Early Childhood Education Services

The third area that deals with children's services is education, including early childhood education services or preschool services. These services are within the area of Aboriginal education services and are therefore addressed as part of the National Aboriginal Education Policy and its twenty-one goals. These services are generally funded by the States/Territories.

Mobile Children's Services

There are presently only three mobile services in the whole country that are run by and provide services for ATSI communities. These are funded through the Children's Services Program. Mainstream mobile services are expected to cover areas where no other services exist specifically for the needs of ATSI children. This is an area of considerable need which has not been seriously addressed to date, indeed, in fact, it has been neglected. The population distribution of ATSI people throughout Australia would suggest that given the number of small and remote communities scattered throughout the country, mobiles would be a particularly suitable form of children's service. The last Mobile Muster in Adelaide earlier this year called on the Government to fund a six month study to be carried out by SNAICC to assess the needs for mobile services for ATSI children.

Aboriginal Children's Services & use of other services

The 1991 census of child care services in Australia showed that 1,231 children use Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS), another 918 were catered for by playgroups. In the reference week of the census, the following was the breakdown of use of service type by ATSI children:

Community-based long day care	863
Private long day care	316
Family day care	443
Outside school hours care	562
Occasional care	61
Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS)	929
Multifunctional Services	54

Total places used by ATSI children 3228

Other points of interest regarding the use of existing children's services is the age breakdown of the children. Figures are only available for MACS. These show that 92% of children using MACS are in the 0–4 age group. This is no different from the figure for the general population.

The employment profile of the parents of the children using services does show a noticeable difference between MACS users and others. In MACS, for

instance, 40% of children had parents who were using the service for work related reasons, this is contrasted with 74% of children in community-based long day care. Looked at another way, whereas 60% of ATSI children had their parents at home and were in child care for reasons other than work, only 26% of non-ATSI children were in such a position.

These figures clearly highlight the arguments of non-AICCA ATSI children's services that they are not the same as other forms of child care services. Before analysing some social indicators that will give us a further insight into why this is so, I will quote you an extract from the Proposed Policy Statement, which was the outcome of a discussion amongst NSW MACS. They renamed their services "Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's and Community Services" (MACCS) to reflect their difference:

MACCS centres exist for reasons entirely different from those which saw the development of mainstream child care centres and the two certainly should not be confused. It was recognised that many Aboriginal children were in a disadvantaged situation due to a number of factors including parents who were unemployed or on very low incomes and generally from low socio-economic and educationally deprived backgrounds. It was obvious that whilst these children were in great need of support if they were truly to achieve social justice through genuine access and equity, then some other arrangements had to be made since there would be no way that their parents could possibly afford to send these children to commercial pre-school. Apart from that, Aboriginal children need conditions which are culturally appropriate and a system which can monitor them as they progress through their education as to provide them with the best possible chance of equity with non-Aboriginals. Clearly the mainstream centres could not provide such a service, nor could they be expected to. The only way those aims could be achieved is through a separate entity which we now wish to call MACCS.¹

Social Indicators

Before delving deeper into the specifics of the various types of services and needs in the area of services for ATSI children, our analysis must take in the broader context of the ATSI community in Australia today.

The importance of children's services for ATSI children must surely be underlined by the fact that the population structure for ATSI people is more akin to that of the population of a developing country. Specifically this means that 40% of the ATSI population is below the age of 15 years in contrast to 23% for the Australian population. Population projections to the end of the century suggest that the 0–15 year age group will decline as a proportion of the total population, but that the absolute numbers will remain static. In policy terms this would mean a decline in the priority given to this age group. The problem is that the present level of services is grossly inadequate and should not be seen as the ideal.

Other indicators show the need for different types of services. These differences are largely influenced by the differences in socio-historic-economic status and culture.

In terms of the distribution of the ATSI population:–

33% were located in rural areas and more than 40% in urban areas outside the major cities. Less than 25% of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander population was located in the major urban areas, while more than 60% of the total Australian population was concentrated in those cities.²

In its last census, the Australian Bureau of Statistics identified 62,481 families in households containing at least one ATSI person. Of these, in 54,134 families, the house-hold head or the husband or wife of the reference person was ATSI. 33% of these families were headed by an Aboriginal man and woman. 33% were Aboriginal single parents – 28% of households was headed by single Aboriginal mothers. The remaining 34% of families were headed by mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal couples.

Employment, Unemployment and Poverty

Employment levels are also a key indicator of the socio-economic status of ATSI people. Generally speaking the labour force participation rates for ATSI people is much lower than for non-ATSI people. This is equally the case with unemployment levels. For women this is lower than for men. In

1986, for instance, 65.5% of ATSI women were not in the labour force, that is, not registered as looking for work, or employed, at that time.

Of those who are employed, there is a heavy reliance on public service employment or employment in government-funded services. This would now include thousands who are employed through Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP), which is utilised in many parts of the remote North Australian region, though is being used to a greater extent in urban areas in the south-eastern states as well. The CDEP is a system of employment creation through the pooling of unemployment benefit with 20–25% on-costs provided by ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission). Many people regard this program as a 'work-for-dole' scheme but often it is the only source of employment in many ATSI communities. As a policy measure it is an easy way for the government to minimise the appalling levels of unemployment in ATSI communities as reflected in the statistics.

With unemployment so high and dependence on benefits also very high, it is not surprising to find that comparative income levels are also not favourable for ATSI people. A comparison of socio-economic levels found that there...

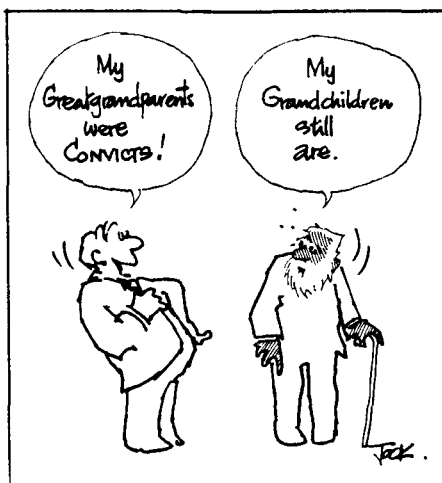
is a massive level of socioeconomic disadvantage for a large proportion of the Aboriginal population, and the disadvantage is increasingly worse in areas where there are more Aborigines.³

These figures paint only part of the picture. While the socio-economic indicators can give us some idea of the comparative position of ATSI people in Australian society, they are only a sketch. They are the outlines of the picture we are painting. They do not, for instance, tell us of the achievements of ATSI people in the face of adversity. We cannot see the ever larger numbers of ATSI children who stay on at school and go through universities, or the ones who participate in the life and well-being of their own communities and Australian society through art, music and sports. Or those that are entering our community organisations and helping in the running of those.

Racism and Violence

These figures also do not tell us about other aspects of life in ATSI communities. It does not quantify the racism that our children encounter every day of their lives, or the 'endemic' racist violence that the Human Rights Commission spoke of, that our people contend with.

Nor do they tell us about the effects of the cultural domination of our society which is played out through the great difficulties our families experience in ensuring that their children are brought up with ATSI values and customs. The allure of European consumer culture can be over-powering. Whilst threatening and denigrating our cultural and customary forms as archaic and anachronistic, they seek to replace it with a destructive and base consumerism that provides short-term satisfaction which contributes in no uncertain way to the premature deaths of many of our people – through what are known as 'life-style diseases'.



Juvenile Justice, Child Welfare and Imprisonment

In the juvenile justice and child welfare systems in all the States and Territories reports continue to show that ATSI children are over-represented in the care of the state, in institutions and in non-government care.⁴ We continue to be deeply concerned about the hundreds of our children in the 'system'. At a recent seminar on the implementation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, delegates agreed that our efforts in relation to ensuring that the international convention is adhered to,

must as a priority be directed towards the needs and rights of Aboriginal children and children in substitute or alternative care, ie, children living away from their families.

Many children have to be placed in alternative care because of the social problems in their families. Alcoholism and other forms of substance abuse are prevalent and domestic or family violence is ever present for many children.

Related to the degree of institutionalisation ATSI children experience is the level of imprisonment of ATSI women. Between 1987 and 1991, the Prison Census shows that there was a 63% rise in the numbers of ATSI women imprisoned. The needs of Aboriginal women are still being overlooked, their needs are often assumed to be adequately dealt with on the basis of data and information for the entire ATSI population. This is also the case with our children.

Health & Education

In the fields of health and education, matters have greatly improved over the years. It has been largely due to the efforts of community-controlled health services and Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups that there exists a National ATSI Education Policy and a National Aboriginal Health Strategy. These will no doubt go a long way towards addressing the poor health conditions of ATSI children and people, and achieving improvement in the level of educational qualifications among our people. In education, even though retention rates are better than they used to be, they are still appalling, especially for adolescents upwards. The early years for children must continue to be the aim of intensive efforts on the part of pre-school and early childhood education services as this is acknowledged to have an impact on the child's ability to cope later in the education system. A recent report has also suggested that:

pre-school based prevention strategies – such as pre-school education – reduce the potential for individuals to engage in delinquent behaviour.⁵

Such a conclusion that focuses on the individual child alone ignores the powerful factors that work on ATSI children that bring them into conflict with the state.

Denial of Identity and Colonialism

The greatest problem for ATSI children is that they continue to suffer the consequences of a mass denial by Australia of indigenous rights to this country. Until suitable recognition is made that this country, our land, was colonised by the ancestors of people living here today, and who continue to benefit from its wealth, the way will not be open for a satisfactory settlement of the undeclared war that exists today. Until official recognition is made of the fact that thousands of our children were illegally and forcibly taken away from our people, causing many of the social problems we face today, we cannot be convinced that there is a genuine desire for this society to make recompense.

The needs of Aboriginal women are still being overlooked, their needs are often assumed to be adequately dealt with on the basis of data and information for the entire ATSI population. This is also the case with our children.

Neither can recognition of ATSI people be in terms of the policy of multiculturalism in Australia – this only goes as far as saying we are one of the many minority groups that migrated here in recent years. We are one of the many indigenous nations of this world who are standing up to take their place in the international community of nations.

Why ATSI Children's Services are Different

These circumstances that we live in – the oppression that we face daily – mean that all the services we provide take on a different form to those provided by the non-ATSI community, even though they may go under the same name.

The array of services provided to ATSI children in Australia today is unplanned

– any planning that does go into it is certainly not coming from ATSI families themselves. The present Ministerial Advisory Committee on Children's Services has no ATSI representative on it. I believe that our children's services and their future development is being tagged onto the end of existing policy that serves the needs of non-ATSI families and their children. In other words, whenever Aboriginal people go along to the Department to seek funding for their proposals, these proposals are squeezed into categories designed by white people for white services. The eventual outcome then resembles neither the mainstream services nor the original idea as conceived by Aboriginal people.

There is no doubt that given that the Australian Government has signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit for Children Declaration for the Survival, Protection and Development of Children, the time is right for the development of a national strategy/plan/policy for our children. The culmination of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody with its strong recommendations to Governments to support the principle of self-determination, should not leave anyone uncertain about the fact that we will be developing that plan or policy. Such a plan or policy is needed because even within the area of ATSI affairs, the needs of our children are given the lowest priority.

The lives of ATSI people in Australia today are a clear indication to us that our children's services need to be support systems as well as just services for children of working parents. Our services may be called mobile services or pre-school groups or playgroups, but the additional support they provide to the children and the families is much greater. If our children are to succeed later on in their lives, they will have to be provided with early intensive efforts on our part. For their families these services will often provide respite. They will also help with what are called 'welfare' matters. Given the poverty in many families, our children's services may also need to provide nutrition programs and maternal and child health services. Counselling will also be needed, as may assistance with locating of lost family or siblings.

Recently, SNAICC presented a paper at an Aboriginal Justice Issues Conference, in which was registered a list of recommendations that need to be followed up by government and by non-government organisations. These are as follows:

1. That the Federal Government implement national legislation that safeguards the rights of ATSI children and that this legalisation should be consistent with the conceptual and cultural differences in child care of the ATSI community. Most importantly any legislation should be developed by the ATSI People whose children it concerns.

2. Recognising the considerable disadvantage and poverty that many Aboriginal families and children live in, governments need to recognise that additional income supplements are required to enable families to be kept together. That additionally, ATSI community organisations need to make cohesive efforts when assisting families by offering and providing the whole range of services that may be required by these families.

The lives of ATSI people in Australia today are a clear indication ...that our children's services need to be support systems as well as just services for children of working mothers.

3. That genuine priority be given to the needs of ATSI children through the development of a national plan/strategy/policy for ATSI Children which forms the basis of a mid to long-term approach to the needs and problems and indeed, the rights of ATSI children. This policy should be the basis for the development of a new ATSI children's services program, that funds the entire range of service types that currently exist. SNAICC has also proposed a study into the needs of communities that may require mobile services as well.

4. That all governments ensure that they implement the articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Further, in connection with this, ATSI

approve the SNAICC submission that sought the role of the national monitoring body/watchdog in relation to the implementation of the Convention.

5. That governments ensure that they do not abdicate their responsibilities to ATSI families and children when services are devolved to ATSI communities especially in the funding and adequate resourcing of these services.

6. That to ensure that no ATSI children are slipping through the net in their brushes with the 'law', that AICCAs be provided the funds to employ lawyers or people with a firm grasp of the laws in relation to families and children, to act as advocates for these children and families when required. This recommendation is made with the knowledge that Aboriginal Legal Services are presently over-stretching their resources in meeting their demands in the area of adult criminal justice needs and are thus unable to give children's needs the attention they deserve. This recommendation is also a recognition of the fact that the area of law covering families and children is a specialised area that requires specialised knowledge and skills.

7. Recognising that we cannot just deal with the problems of the individual, nor with the 'problem individual', alone, but that our approach must be preventative in that it addresses the needs of all ATSI children within the context of a society that is hostile to the development needs of ATSI children, it is imperative that ATSI children have their recreational needs commensurate with their age and development, met in the areas they live in. All children need intellectual and physical stimulation and ATSI children are no different in this respect. In fulfilling these needs funding authorities must be mindful that they allow communities and their children to design their own projects in order to ensure that they are suitable for their needs.

8. Nothing should be done that undermines the role of the extended family and everything should be done that strengthens it. To quote Royal Commissioner Pat Dodson:

Parents and families need to be involved in the preventative and custodial situations confronting their children if they are to have any relevance and any long standing

benefits for the individual concerned. The authorities can no longer assume a role and responsibility that fundamentally belongs with the parents and the extended family. Alternatives need to be sought and acted upon. To enable alternatives which incorporate family networks, the respective authorities need to give consideration to entering into contractual arrangements with families and community groups within an Aboriginal domain, that will enable the delivery of programs that are both culturally sensitive and socially appropriate. Apart from dealing with the issue at the individual level, there will be a natural flow-on to all sectors of the Aboriginal community as such a structural arrangement will enable the social and cultural values which have been the subject of erosion over past decades to be revitalised in a meaningful and productive way'.⁶

These then are our proposals to guide the development of children's services in the future so that hundreds if not thousands of our children do not continue to be sacrificed to a system that seems to have an insatiable appetite. 'Our children', as one of our National Aboriginal & Islander Children's Day posters once said, 'do not make the problems, so why should they pay'. It is an oft repeated but little heeded statement that goes, 'our children are our future'.

While we are preoccupied solely by the difficulties we face as adults, we neglect our children's needs, and when things go wrong ten to fifteen years from now, we will continue to ponder over the same tragic problems.

The problems of many adults today were made possible in their childhood, yet we still see the same mistakes being repeated. While we are preoccupied solely by the difficulties we face as adults, we neglect our children's needs, and when things go wrong ten to fifteen years from now, we will continue to ponder over the same tragic problems. Let's give ourselves and our children a head-start by addressing their needs today in a positive way. Instead of treating our children as social problems, delinquents

and deviants to be provided with special programmes to rehabilitate them, let's treat them as young people with rights who have a place in our community on a par with ours, who have limitless energy, enthusiasm and imagination and the potential to cure our world of some of the ills they had no part in creating. ♦

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